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## The Generalist Practice: Perceived Preparedness Among Social Workers

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THE GENERALIST PRACTICE: PERCIEVED PREPAREDNESS AMONG  
SOCIAL WORKERS

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Emily Marie Balandra

June 2017

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SOCIAL WORKERS

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Emily Marie Balandra

June 2017

Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess the perceived preparedness among social workers who have graduated from a generalist social work practice program. By researching the preparedness of generalist practice social workers, the researcher will be able to gain insight regarding the self-efficacy and confidence among social workers with the generalist practice education and to better understand their commonalities as well as barriers. Due to the lack of research on the topic, is an exploratory research project. All data gathered in the interviews were analyzed with qualitative techniques. The interviews will aim to identify major themes and sub-themes to organize the data collected. Participants were asked about their perspective and lived experiences about their generalist practice education; the qualitative method used was phenomenology. Overall, the data collected from the research could possibly impact the outlook of generalist social work education as well as give future students the proper information to be able to decide on the type of education they would like to invest in. Through data collection, participants stated that previous work experience and their field placements had a major impact on their knowledge base going into the field. Secondly, most participants expressed that the generalist practice helped them obtain their first job upon graduation. Although most participants indicated a positive correlation with the generalist practice, they were able to highlight some suggestions for the generalist practice curriculum which include, having a DSM course and focusing on the student's preferred theoretical orientation.

## DEDICATION

I would like to thank my family and friends who have supported me throughout the past two years. I am extremely lucky to be surrounded by an abundance of amazing people who have helped to make me the person that I am today. To my parents, thank you for always believing in me; your love and constant encouragement is what made this goal achievable. I hope to continue to make you proud, I love you. "In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened."- Vin Scully

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

There are many decisions that have to be made in the beginning stages of applying to a social work graduate program. Besides the usual criteria of location, tuition costs and living arrangements, the most important aspect of graduate school is narrowing down the type of education you would like to receive. Depending on your interest, you will have an idea on the population you would like to study. Usually an applicant has the opportunity to declare the population and field of practice they would like to focus on. Answering this question will shape the next few years of your education, training and ultimately lay the foundation for your career upon graduation. One of the educational options that are offered in the school of social work is called the generalist practice. This type of curriculum offers students the opportunity to learn a variety of skill sets instead of specializing in one particular area.

The generalist practice is a fairly new approach to the design of social work curriculum. Although this model provides social workers with a variety of skill sets and prepares them for multiple settings in the field, the only time that a student will get specialized training is in their desired field placement. The downside to that concept is that the desired field placement is not promised, leaving the student to settle with their next option. Generalist social work graduate students rely heavily on the field supervisors and agencies to give the

necessary knowledge and insight on our population of choice that the course work does not. Holloway et al. (2009), notes that in contrast to other professions, the precise focus and scope of the social work profession is viewed as somewhat vague and ambiguous. Since the generalist practice aims to be diverse in its curriculum, you can see where this notion is evident because of the foundation of the generalist practice. Furthermore, Holloway et al. (2009) goes on to mention that, we experience difficulty in defining the parameters of just what constitutes the core or essence of our profession's domain. This results in continuing conflicts with sister professions and semi-professions about just where our turf ends and theirs begin.

There is a vague aspect to the generalist practice, which raises the question if generalist social workers feeling that their education has prepared them enough for the job market upon graduation. Schatz, Jenkins & Sheafar (1990) state that the inconsistent educational experience for students preparing to enter the social work profession and confusion on the part of employing agencies regarding the competencies they can expect from the graduates of these programs.

This issue has implications on social work practice because the information gathered can benefit social work education and make it stronger. It can be enhanced by helping future generalist social workers feel more confident once they graduate as well as during the process of finding a job. Last, there can be more emphasis placed on field placements to assure that students are getting

the type of field experience that they prefer since it is the only specialized component of their education. Possible consequences for a lack of preparedness could be incompetency within a new agency. The social worker may make a mistake that could be detrimental to a client or their agency. All of these aspects are worth the exploration of this data. Graduating students should feel comfortable with the level of education they received through the university as well as competent in their future job placements.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research study was to assess the perceived preparedness among social workers who have graduated from a generalist practice program. There is a lack of research to contribute to the notion of perceived preparedness for generalist social workers, especially on their experiences upon graduation and any obstacles they faced prior to finding a job. A few other components that will be addressed to add to the data collection are the pros and cons of the generalist practice through the experiences of the participants. Did the participants feel that they had to explain the generalist model and to what extent? The last aspect would be to ask the participants if they felt that the generalist practice education was just as good and sufficient as a specialized program. All of these questions are what will make the data insightful and it will allow the participants to give their honest opinion on the matter. In examining the generalist practice education, it is essential to think

critically regarding the overall objectives of the program. By researching the preparedness of generalist practice social workers, the researcher gained insight regarding the self-efficacy and confidence among social workers with the generalist practice education. Overall, the data collected from the research could possibly impact the outlook of generalist social work education as well as give future students the proper information to be able to decide on the type of education they would like to invest in.

The research method that was used in this research study was a qualitative design. Due to the fairly new topic of choice, there is a lack of research done. Since there is a small amount of information on the topic, the researcher conducted an exploratory study. This research design will allow for a better understanding of the participants' insights and commonalities. Simply giving a survey with pre-established responses would not suffice for this research topic. The researcher prefers in-depth, personal and unique answers in order to be able to grasp the real experiences of the participants.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

The significance of this study began with the curiosity of the researcher in regards to the generalist practice education program and the perceived preparedness of generalist social workers. This project has social work implications in regards to the generalist practice program and could create change within the curriculum as needed. There are multiple facets that make up

the generalist practice which include assessing, implementing and the evaluation stage. These three aspects are relevant to the research and play a key role in understanding the project. It is essential to examine the outlook that generalist social workers have regarding their education because it can have an impact on social work education in the future.

Assessing the generalist practice is part of the beginning stages of the research project. In order to fully comprehend the findings, there has to be an understanding of the generalist practice program and its overall objectives and how it relates to students. The research assessed the perceived preparedness among social workers with a generalist social work education. Depending on the information gathered, a variety of information can be available for future students. The data will also allow social work practice to be enhanced by implementing the necessary changes to assure that students are receiving the types of experiences needed to be a social worker in any setting. Once the data was collected, there was an evaluation component to the research project. The exploration of the data was essential to the study because this is where the commonalities and perspectives of the participants will be examined. Executing the steps above will guide the research as well as support the significance of the overall project. Listening to the participant's critique of their education will be beneficial to the program because it will allow growth and enhancement to the overall success of the program.

There is a small amount of information and research that explores the experiences of a generalist social worker upon graduation. The findings of this study gathered information from professional social workers who graduated from a generalist practice program. The data will allow social work students to be able to make an educated decision on whether or not they would like the generalist practice education or a specialized program. The question the current study will address is: What is the perceived preparedness among social workers who have an educational background in the generalist practice?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This chapter consists of an examination of research significant to an analysis of the generalist practice. The subsections will include a brief definition of the generalist practice, history, opposing views and a comparison of specialized education and the generalist practice. The final subsection will examine the ecological perspective as well as systems theory, which are essential to understanding this topic.

The Council on Social Work Education (2016) defines the generalist Practice as follows: “Generalist practice is grounded in the liberal arts and the person and environment construct. To promote human and social well-being, generalist practitioners use a range of prevention and intervention methods in their practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.” A generalist social worker has a wide range of knowledge that can be utilized in the field. According to the Council on Social Work Education (2016) the generalist practitioner identifies with the social work profession and applies ethical principles and critical thinking in practice. Generalist practitioners incorporate diversity in their practice and advocate for human rights and social and economic justice. They recognize, support, and build on the strengths and resiliency of all human beings. They engage in research-informed practice and are proactive in responding to the impact of context on professional practice.



## History of the Generalist Practice

In order to fully grasp the generalist practice it is important to mention its history in social work education. The generalist practice has been a work in progress for many years and has a long history within the education system. In the 1920's, elements of the generalist practice and specialized practice had emerged into the profession. Mary Richmond recognized that there were certain intervention approaches that pertained to practice; she saw that there was a need to distinguish between the generalist elements of social work and specialization. This is when the discussion of the differences began. Over the next few decades, the elements that made up generalist social work became more complex and more difficult to define the boundaries. (Schatz, Jenkins, & Sheafor, 1990)

According to Schatz, Jenkins & Sheafor (1990) Harriet Barlett published a book and noted that all social workers need knowledge about individuals, groups and the community that is related to their social functioning but not limited to particular interventive measures and called for social work to life out this knowledge from the specialized methods and reorganize it to make it visible and available with the profession's overall body of knowledge. These are the roots of the generalist practice and the beginning of a different type of education. Schatz, Jenkins, & Sheafor( 1990) go on to note that from the beginning the intention for the generalist practice was to highlight that a generalist social worker served as a utility worker and was able to provide a variety of tasks within a variety of clients

and populations. In the beginning stages of the profession, there was a need to expand the knowledge of social works yet there was already discussion regarding the inconsistencies of generalized and specialized education. Bartlett recognized the significance of specialization in the field of social work and noted that it is, "Important to describe the full range of professional activity to capture the distinguishing characteristics of a particular field, no matter how uneven the performance" (Raymond, 1993, p. 44). The controversy between the generalist practice and specialized practice has been going on for many years yet there is a lack of information distinguishing the strengths and limitations regarding implementation of skills and the perceived preparedness of social workers from a generalist practitioner considering it has been questioned before.

### Generalist Practice versus Specialized Education

It is essential to be able to recognize the strengths and limitations of the generalist practice in order to be able to make adjustments, it is also important to have something to compare the generalist practice program to. Gibbs & Lohmann (1990) conducted a study on MSW graduates. The study consisted of comparing two different MSW programs: a generalist program and a direct service program. The two groups had no significant differences in the settings that the two groups were serving. The data showed a difference in the way that students from the different programs approached their practice. One of the main focuses was to see if the generalist social worker used micro, macro or a mixed

system approach. Gibbs & Lohmann (1990) noted that generalist were more likely to see an individual's issue as more a community issue, which called for a need to change the larger picture. Another difference between generalist program students and direct service program was that generalist students were more likely to take initiative in their job and to be able to work with administrators of their agencies, as well as feeling comfortable to share new ideas. Last, generalist students had a positive outlook toward research, even those who were in a micro setting. Gibbs & Lohmann (1990) noted that the disparity between the data collected from the two studies suggests that there could be a difference in maturity level but overall, further research is needed on the subject. Research such as this study is relevant to generalist social workers because it helps to gauge their preparedness in the field. Examining different programs is important to be able to measure the competency level between the two different programs. This is one of the few studies that compare the two different programs. Gathering data on the effectiveness and preparedness of social workers from a generalist practice would be beneficial information to the program. If there is more research that can be made in order to be able to determine differences, then that is where growth can happen. As stated before, there is little information on this subject and it is vital to go in-depth with research on generalist program graduates, not only to see difference but to find strengths and limitations that can help to benefit a generalist program and make it stronger.

As cited in Raymond (1993) a survey that was done on social work students in 1983. Their education varied between a BSW program and a MSW program. The study consisted of examining the two groups in the areas of concentration, their programs and where they were employed after graduation. The important aspect of this study that pertains to my research is that no data was gathered regarding their satisfaction with the social work curriculum in regards to their preparation for their practice. There seems to be a gap between implementing the curriculum and actually obtaining data on the levels of efficacy in graduating students. Not only is this study fairly old, there is a major disparity when it comes to researching the generalist practice and how professional social workers are able to transition into their practice without having a specialized education compared to most graduating MSW programs.

### Opposing Views

One of the main opposing views on the generalist practice is the blurred boundaries of tasks in various settings. The same concerns that are mentioned in chapter one are mentioned in the article from Schatz, Jenkins, & Sheafor (1990) which states that, the lack of clarity has been an anything goes attitude by social work education programs, resulting in both an inconsistent educational experience for students preparing to enter the social work profession and confusion on the part of employing agencies regarding the competencies they can expect from the graduates of these programs.

Critics of the generalist approach feel that it “does not provide specific enough sufficient instruction as to which parts of the person and the environment the worker should attend first” (Raymond, 1993, p.36). Notions such as this are a common theme in regards to the generalist practice. My research will be able to gather information from professional social workers and their experience with a generalist practice education. Since the research on the topic is minimal, having the opportunity to interview social workers with this particular background will give a more updated outlook and overview of the generalist practice. Ultimately, over the decades there have always been debates over the level of depth social work education. There is a constant struggle and lack of clarity regarding the roles of a specialized education and the generalist practice. (Leighinger, 1980)

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

There are two theories that are used to conceptualize the main concepts of the generalist practice which are systems theory and the ecological perspective. Systems theory and the ecological perspective are embedded in the fabric of social work and continue to be the theory that guides the profession, specifically the generalist practice.

“Ecological systems theory is a conceptual framework for the person-in-environment perspective. That has achieved nearly universal acceptance in the profession. This theory recognizes interrelations of human problems, life situations and social conditions” (Coady & Lehmann, 2007, p.5). This notion is

an essential component to the generalist practice because it shapes the way that social workers are expected to utilize their skill set. We have to be aware of various salient factors that can contribute to the client's behaviors. If a generalist social worker's job is to be able to help a client in a variety of ways, then this is the theory that would guide the concept best.

The ecological perspective also has generalist social work implications such as the need to have more in depth knowledge for a particular population in order to better serve the client. As social workers, we are brokers for the clients and should give proper resources. This can be a difficult task without having an advanced skill set among a certain population. This approach refers to the transactions between individuals and their environment, being more knowledgeable in a certain area of social work can be beneficial to the client and the population. It is imperative to be able to connect the client with the organizations that they associate with. The ecological perspective allows the clinician to paint a better picture for the client in order to find gaps in resources. In addition, it helps the client to remove or add positive and beneficial aspects of their life.

Systems theory is another vital aspect of the generalist practice; it takes a different angle into an individual's life. It helps to acknowledge various systems within an individual such as family, organizations and the community.

“Traditional systems theory suggests that systems or organizations are characterized by order, rationality and stability, hence the emphasis in such

stable systems on concepts such as boundaries, homeostasis and equilibrium” (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2009, p.20). Everyone is consistently involved in some sort of system. As a social worker, we are constantly observing the systems of our clients in order to understand them. Even when we take a look at ourselves as practitioners, we have systems that make us the social workers that we are. One of the main aspects of systems theory is maintaining homeostasis which ties into the generalist practice because generalist practitioners want to be competent, confident and well prepared in their field of choice. Being put into a situation where the skills and knowledge you have are not enough, can alter someone’s homeostasis as a professional.

These two theories help to shape the generalist practice and in this case; it allows the social workers to be examined. Looking at the generalist practice through the lens of the ecological perspective and systems theory helps us to see where we need to grow and where we can better ourselves. Much like our clients, there is a need to grow and adapt to our environment. Being able to recognize the organizations that assist us to be better practitioners, such as the school of social work and the generalist practice; learning is constant and the world around us is constantly changing. If we are in the field of helping others then we need to make sure that we are the most prepared we can be.

## Summary

This study will examine the self-efficacy and perceived preparedness among social workers with a generalist practice education. Although the generalist practice has developed great social workers over the years, it's the initial preparedness that this study will explore. The researcher seeks to gain insight from students who have completed the program through in-depth analysis of their experiences. Furthermore, the data collected can be used to enhance the knowledge of future students regarding their education.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study is intended to explore the perceived preparedness among social workers who have an educational background in the generalist practice. This chapter contains details of how this study was carried out. The subsections will include an outline of the study design, information on sampling, data collection instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, data analysis and a summary.

#### Study Design

The objective of this study is to gather information from social workers with a generalist practice education to better understand their commonalities, barriers and explore suggestions to enhance the knowledge of future students regarding their education. Due to the lack of research on the topic, this is an exploratory research project. Simply giving a survey with pre-established responses would not suffice for this type of research. I asked open ended questions to be able to have in-depth, personal and unique answers in order to be able to grasp the real experiences of the individuals that will be interviewed.

A key facet to an exploratory, qualitative approach is the variety of response that will be given from the perspective of a generalist practice social

worker. As stated above, a qualitative research project allows for participants to give their own subjective opinions rather than a standard response. I feel that utilizing this approach will give more information than a traditional survey. Facilitating this research will add to the current minimal data that is available regarding the personal experiences of social workers with a generalist practice background. In regards to limitations for this research project, professional social workers may not want to admit to any level of incompetency in the field which could cause the results to be skewed and the information will not reflect the genuine opinions of the social workers. The question the current study will address is: What is the perceived preparedness among social workers who have an educational background in the generalist practice?

### Sampling

The purpose of this study is to obtain insight among social workers who have a generalist practice education. The sampling technique used for this project is non-probability- purposive sampling. The reason for this is because a colleague gave me a few social workers to interview and then proceeded to give me a list of social workers with a generalist education from the entire agency. Since I have a list of social workers, I am able to pick out the participants that meet the requirements I am looking for. I interviewed eight social workers in San Bernardino County.

## Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected via live, audio recorded interviews. Each interview began with an introduction and description of the study and its purpose. Each participant completed a demographic survey. The only prerequisite needed to participate in the research project was having an educational background in the generalist practice. This study answered a few questions regarding social workers and their educational experiences: 1) did you ever have any concerns with the generalist practice education you were receiving? 2) Once you graduated, did you still have some of those concerns? 3) Upon graduation, did you feel that having a generalist practice education helped or hindered your job search? 4) What was your level of confidence applying for jobs? 5) Did you find yourself having to explain what the generalist model was due to lack of insight from the employer? 6) What curriculum enhancements do you suggest? Last, now that you have your career, do you feel that the generalist practice education is just as sufficient as a specialized program?

## Procedures

Through networking I was able to obtain lists of participants that fit my requirements of social workers who have graduated from a generalist education program. First, I personally contacted various social workers and informed them about my research project. Once I had willing participants, I set up an interview date that best fit the participant's schedule. I met with the participants at their

place of work. Each interview took approximately 15-20 minutes. Upon completion of the interview, the researcher gave the participant a gift card to thank them for their time. Last, I conducted interviews until I felt that I had enough information to complete the analysis. All of the interviews took place during the winter quarter of 2017.

### Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of the individuals participating in my research will be kept confidential. All paperwork regarding the research will not contain any names or identifying information. Participants read and signed an informed consent prior to participating in the study as well as consent to be audio recorded. After the data was collected, all information regarding the research project was destroyed.

### Data Analysis

All data gathered in the interviews was analyzed with qualitative techniques. Collecting data through interviews was the most effective way to get a better understanding of the participant's insight, barriers and commonalities. Once the data was collected, I listened to the audio recordings and took down the transcripts of the conversation. All interviews were transcribed onto word and were coded. At this point it was essential to identify major themes and sub-themes to organize the data collected. Since the researcher asked the

participants their perspective and lived experiences about their generalist practice education; the qualitative method that was used was phenomenology.

I had conflicting expectations in regards to the findings of this research project. I expected to find commonalties among the participants in reference to the lack of specific training that was given during the duration of the program. I feel that this is a common limitation that arises with the generalist model. I also feel that a large portion of my participants will have felt frustration in competency and training in their particular setting at one point or another. Last, I felt that the importance of a student's field placement will be an important topic to discuss. Conversely, participants can report that the generalist model gives more opportunities to have different educational experiences and with this type of education, we can learn to adapt in any professional setting. Also, although generalist social workers do not have a speciation, they could be more marketable because of the macro and micro educational and experience. All of these ideas were important to take into consideration and the results of the research can help future students to think critically about the generalist practice.

### Summary

This study examined the self-efficacy and perceived preparedness among social workers with a generalist practice education. Through multiple interviews, the facilitator wanted to obtain in-depth, subjective opinions and barriers in order to better understand the experiences of the participants. Furthermore, the data

collected can be used to enhance the knowledge of future students regarding their education. The facilitator collected data through qualitative methods.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

The data collection and analysis portion of this study is discussed in the following content. The pertinent themes are highlighted and supported by participant responses gathered from individual interviews. The four themes include: importance of the generalist model, impact of field placement, impact of previous work and treatment orientation.

#### Sample Description

The participants for this research study had one prerequisite which included being a social worker with a generalist practice education. The current research study aimed to assess the perceived preparedness among social workers who have graduated from a generalist practice program. The participants of this study are made up of social workers from San Bernardino County. A total of eight participants were interviewed.

Demographic data were collected to provide additional descriptive information for each participant. A total of eight social workers ( $N=8$ ). Participants self-reported their age; ethnic background, number of field of practices, and number of years in the field (see Table 1). Additionally, all participants reported to be licensed clinical social workers. Interviews lasted approximately 15-20 minutes and the researcher transcribed them at a later time.

All paperwork and audio recordings regarding the research did not contain any names or identifying information and were shredded and deleted to maintain confidentiality. Each participant was given a letter of consent. The researcher gifted a Starbucks card with five dollars as a token of appreciation.

Table 1. Demographics

		N	%
Age	30-35	5	62.5%
	36-40	1	12.50%
	40-45	1	12.50%
	46-55	1	12.50%
Gender	Male	4	50%
	Female	4	50%
Ethnicity	Hispanic	6	75%
	Caucasian	2	25%
# of Field of practices			
	1-2	7	87.50%
	3-4	1	12.50%
Years in the field			
	5-10	6	75%
	11+	2	25%
Licensed			
	Yes	8	100%



## Study Themes

Through the data analysis, the interviews revealed six emerging themes which include; 1.) positive and negative impacts, 2.) theoretical framework, 3.) impact of field placements, 4.) impact of previous work, and 5.) generalist practice: helped or hindered, 6.) suggestions for the generalist practice. Impact of previous work will be broken down into two sub themes which include; generalist practice benefited employment and generalist practice hindered employment. Additionally, Suggestions for the generalist practice will be broken down into two sub themes which include; case conceptualization, and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) studies.

## Positive and Negative Impacts

A majority of the participants expressed positive and negative components of the generalist practice model. There were various constructive aspects of the generalist practice that emerged during the interviewing process; the first was flexibility of the generalist practice. All eight of the participants mentioned that the generalist practice allowed them to be more open and flexible in their practice. Participants stated, “The word that comes to mind is eclectic and the utilization of different theories. Each patient needs can be met with a different framework. As a clinician you not pigeon holed into one perspective” (Participant 3, personal interview, March 2017).

“The generalist practice allows me to first engage the patient and build rapport before you can even start to figure out things. Often time’s clinicians just want to go in there and solve the problem and get the patient moving to where ever they want to move instead of letting the patient make their own decisions”( Participant 5, personal interview, February 2017).

“You are able to look outside the box more. You’re not so limited in the black and white perspective. You need to be worldlier because everyone is different within therapy and case management. You can’t treat people the same, so I think that’s the best thing about it. You can grab things from all over versus one certain tool box” (Participant 8, personal interview, March 2017).

A majority of the participants also expressed the negative aspects of the generalist practice that they felt impacted their practice. Participants stated, “I lacked an understanding and ability to utilize some of the most popular modalities as I only had an overview of the modalities” (Participant 1, personal interview, February 2017).

“They teach a broad range of skills and knowledge base and in time you may lose some of the things you’ve learned because you learn so many theories at one time, it’s had to keep up with them over the years” (Participant 2, personal interview, March 2017).

“Because it’s so structured, it doesn’t allow for things to kind of flow. It sort of cookie cutter and doesn’t allow to grow and to be able to do other things that might be a little different or unorthodox. It’s just very structured. Here is the first thing, here is that last thing but working in this field nothing runs that fluidly or smoothly” (Participant 5, personal interview, February 2017).

### Theoretical Framework

The importance of finding your theoretical framework is a sub theme that arose throughout the participants’ narratives. Participants expressed how they would have liked to have an emphasis on theoretical framework because it would have helped them in practice. “I only have an overview of the modalities and theories; it made it difficult for me to know what my own treatment modality was going to be” (Participant 1, personal interview, February 2017).

“There are seasoned therapist here and you see them working and thinking from a particular theoretical orientation, that be CBT, motivational interviewing, you see them oozing in their theory and for us, you don’t necessarily get that”(Participant 6, personal interview, February 2017).

Conversely, participants also expressed how having one theoretical framework during practice can be difficult as well due to the various types of diagnosis and symptoms that may be presented.

“Cognitive behavioral therapy is not for all the patients because they’re pretty psychotic. Motivational interviewing can work if they’re in the right place, strengths perspective is a good. I feel like doing all those is eclectic. You can’t just do CBT because that wouldn’t reach even half of our patients” (Participant 8, personal interview, March 2017).

“These patients don’t present with the same symptoms. Their diagnosis might be the same but the symptoms are different. For example, if you’re working with the transgender community, long timer, short timer, CBT is different. The approach is different for everyone because not everyone learns the same way” (Participant 3, personal interview, March 2017).

### Impact of Field Placements

Participants held a common belief that their field placements impacted their social work practice a great deal while in the MSW program.

“In class we would go over diagnoses but you didn’t get to really see schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, you didn’t see the symptoms. It’s one thing to read about it in a book but to be actually there and say, how do I handle this? How do I redirect someone who is talking a mile a minute?” (Participant 5, personal interview, February 2017).

Although the suggestions for more field placements were minimal, it is noteworthy because participants did benefit from their field placements. One of the suggestions was to make sure that the program has more contracts with various agencies. For example, if a student wanted a forensic setting and their only option is DSH-Patton, why not have DSH-Metropolitan as another option for the students who truly want that experience. Field placement had a major impact on the participants and many expressed how they learned more at field placement. Due to the lack of specialization in the generalist practice, there was a positive correlation between the impact of field placement and competency level of the student.

### Impact of Previous Work History

Another theme revealed during data collection was the impact of previous work history. Participants shared their experiences in their work that helped to shape their practice. Various participants expressed how their previous work contributed to their knowledge base during the program.

“When I see certain behaviors in adults, those behaviors remind me of the behaviors that the kids in group homes exhibited. For example, when they would cuss me out, they just wanted to see if I would come back after they acted like that. I see that in some of the patients, they can cuss you out and they want to see if you

come back, to see if you are, or if you engage with them or just back off” (Participant 5, personal interview, February 2017).

### Generalist Practice: Helped or Hindered

Two participants expressed that the generalist practice hindered their employment experience upon graduation. “I think that it hindered be because during the interview process when questioned about “what my treatment modality is” I did not really have an answer yet” (Participant 1, personal interview, February 2017).

“I think it may have hindered me. Personally, I think I struggled as a new clinician to figure out that theoretical orientation I come from and still don’t think I know now. I think it’s because the generalist practice” (Participant 6, personal interview, February 2017).

The remaining participants had common narratives of the generalist practice helping their employment experience. “I think it helped me. If all two years of grad school is one theory, then you’re stuck when you come in contact with difficult patients” (Participant 3, personal interview, March 2017).

“I did not have a problem getting hired because my focus in my second year was in mental health so I wrote all of my papers on mental health and did my second year internship in mental health” (Participant 7, personal interview, February 2017).

## Suggestions for the Generalist Practice

### Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Studies

DSM studies were a theme that was evident in the qualitative data collected. Multiple participants suggested including a DSM course in the curriculum and noted how much they would have benefited from getting more training with the DSM. “I felt that my clinical skills were behind some of the other schools who had a more specific focus and spend more time on DSM studies” (Participant 1, personal interview, February 2017).

“I remember that we were really lacking the DSM. I was thinking that if it was possible, there should be a course on the DSM. That book is so massive, you need a year. For those who are in placement with therapy, how do you diagnose? How can you come up with something that you are not familiar with? To a point it’s almost unethical to label someone without knowing that there are other things that look like it. I mean, it takes time but there should be more practice. For me, I’m still learning. It’s been 10 years but there is a lot of differential diagnosis. When you get that book, it’s so big yet you’re supposed to have a snap judgement and you could be unsure because there are so many diagnoses that look similar. The point is, when you go to school you should have at least one quarter of just DSM training” (Participant 4, personal interview, March 2017).

### Case Conceptualization

Along with DSM studies as a suggestion, case conceptualization was a sub theme that emerged. Participants expressed the importance of focusing on case conceptualization and the engagement process.

“I would say the engagement process. I have seen where people go right into planning and implementing and not really knowing that patient and I feel like the engagement part really needs to be emphasized because you’re talking to a person and unfortunately you see a lot of people talking to a chart, piece of paper. As someone who doesn’t have feelings or emotions or family but when you sit there with the person and you look into their eyes and you talk to them, you start learning more about them that what is just said in an assessment and you build that trust” (Participant 5, personal interview, February 2017).

“Case conceptualization would be beneficial and it would help you with licensure. Going over those scenarios, with the test, all the answers are right but you have to find the best answer. It’s important to look over cases” (Participant 6, personal interview, February 2017).

“I think students would benefit from a little more education on theory and more hands on didactic approach, not so much lecture. Simulated therapy sessions. In



real life it isn't as easy, but it's a good way to practice" (Participant 3, personal interview, March 2017).

### Summary

This chapter provides major themes among social workers who have graduated from a generalist practice program in regards to their perceived preparedness going into the field. The eight participants were from San Bernardino County and shared various commonalities throughout the data collected such as; the positive and negative impacts of the generalist practice, Impact of field placements, impact of previous work, whether the generalist practiced help or hindered employment and last, suggestions for the generalist practice. Through the data analysis, the researcher was able to provide examples of each highlighted theme.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will discuss the major findings in chapter four as well as their relevance to existing literature. Also presented in this chapter will be social work implications, limitations, recommendation for social work practice, policy, and research. Last, it will conclude with a summarization of the study.

#### Discussion

The results of this study allowed the researcher to gain insight on the perceived preparedness among social workers who have graduated from a generalist practice program. There are various ways that the literature correlates with the responses of the participants which allowed the data to highlight important components of the generalist model. Participants were able to share their self-efficacy in regards to the generalist practice model and their personal experiences as well as provide suggestions for the curriculum.

Schatz, Jenkins & Sheafor (1990) note the inconsistent educational experience for generalist practice practitioners and how that can affect the employment agencies in regards to the competencies of a generalist practice student. This study correlates with the responses of the participants that stated that the generalist model hindered their employment. Although this was not the

experience for the majority of the participants, it was clear that some participants felt that they were not adequate enough for the job due to their lack of training. The main argument for the participants that felt these sentiments was that they felt like they did not have a clinical identity because of the generalist model. Participants felt that they did not get the opportunity to explore their theoretical orientations while in their program.

Schatz, Jenkins, & Sheafor (1990) note that the initial intention of the generalist practice was to highlight that a generalist social worker functioned as a utility worker and was able to provide a variety of tasks within a variety of clients and populations. The data collected is consistent with this notion. The participants felt they had a broad range of functions in the field and stated that the generalist model helped them to apply various interventions to their clients as needed. It was evident that most participants felt that they benefited from the generalist practice because it allowed them to pull from various treatment modalities to fit the client's needs.

### Limitations

There are various notable limitations for this study. The most significant limitation was the sample size. Although the sample size was equal in regards to gender, there was a disparity when it came to the particular program the participants graduated from. Although the research sought a much wider variety of respondents, all of the participants are California State University, San

Bernardino alumni. This potentially altered the outlook of the generalist practice because all of the participants came from the same program. Another limitation is that the study did not ask questions specific to macro experiences they had in field placement, school or their job setting. All of the questions came from a micro perspective on social work practice taking the research a step further would have been helpful to truly understand the participant's preparedness in their desired settings.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

As evidenced by the findings of this study, there are various suggestions to the generalist practice program that participants expressed which include the implementation of the clinician's theoretical framework, the importance of field placement and including more DSM studies to the curriculum. Although a majority of the participants stated that the generalist practice helped them obtain their first job placement, most of them mentioned theoretical framework as a suggestion for the generalist practice curriculum. Participants discussed the importance of having a focus, as well as a preferred treatment modality. Since the generalist practice does not follow one particular framework, participants felt that there should be more training to figure out which framework they thrive in. In doing so, the social worker will be able to conceptualize various cases through their specific framework and implement the corresponding interventions.

The most significant recommendation to the generalist practice is having more DSM training in the program. The majority of the participants stated that they would have benefited a great deal if the program had more clinical training during their time in graduate school. As one of the participants stated, The DSM has such a large amount of information and it is impossible to acquire all that knowledge in a short amount of time. The suggestion to the program would be to offer more courses on the DSM to enhance the clinical skills of the social worker.

Based on the limited amount of literature on the issue as well as the small sample size of this study, further research should be conducted in order to compare and contrast the perceived preparedness of social workers who have graduated from specialized education program versus a generalist practice program. As stated in the limitations, all of the participants came from California State University, San Bernardino which gives a very specific outlook towards the generalist practice. It would be beneficial to gain more insight from various generalist practice programs as well as the specialized programs to give a more in-depth perspective on the issue.

### Conclusion

This study identified areas in which social workers with a generalist practice program were able to highlight what benefited them in the field as well as what hindered them. Collecting this data will give future students more insight to the type of education they would like to invest in. After reading the findings of

the data, future students can determine if the generalist practice suites them.

The study was also able to pin point suggestions for the generalist practice which can be taken into consideration for future curriculum changes.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT



California State University, San Bernardino  
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee  
APPROVED 1/23/21 VOID AFTER 1/22/21  
IRB# SU1736 CHAIR [Signature]

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Social Work

### INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine social workers' perceived preparedness for working with clients with a generalist practice education. The study is being conducted by Emily Balandra, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Herb Shon, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to examine the perceived preparedness among 8- 10 social workers who have an educational background in the generalist practice.

**Description:** Participants will be asked questions on their experiences, opinions and perceived preparedness in regards to their generalist practice education.

**Participation:** Your participation in the study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

**Confidentiality or anonymity:** Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in aggregated form and in coding.

**Duration:** It will take 15 to 20 minutes to complete the interview process.

**Risks:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

**Benefits:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Shon at hshon@csusb.edu (Office phone: (909)537-5532)

**Results:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks Database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2017.

I give permission to be audio recorded for the purpose of this study. Yes ☐ No ☐

909.537.5501

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

The California State University • Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles  
Maritime Academy • Monterey Bay • Northridge • Pomona • Sacramento • San Bernardino • San Diego • San Francisco • San Jose • San Luis Obispo • San Marcos • Sonoma • Stanislaus





College of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
*School of Social Work*

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Place an X mark here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

909.537.5501

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APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHICS

## Demographics

1. Age \_\_\_\_

2. Gender

Male ☐ Female ☐

3. Ethnicity/Race

Hispanic ☐

African American ☐

Asian ☐

American Indian or Alaska Native ☐

Caucasian ☐

Other ☐

4. Licensed ☐ Not Licensed ☐

5. Please check field of practice:

Child Welfare ☐

Mental Health ☐

School of Social Work ☐

Correctional Services ☐

Substance Abuse ☐

Forensic ☐

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Please list the amount of years in the field: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Client Population:

Children ☐

Elderly ☐

Families ☐

Minority Ethnic Groups ☐

Gay and Lesbian Population ☐

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW QUESTION

## Interview Questions

1. How would you define the generalist practice?
2. In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of the generalist practice?
3. Do you think that being a generalist practitioner has helped or hindered you in obtaining your first MSW job? How so?
4. Did you have any outside experience that assisted you in your knowledge of the field you work in.
5. In your experience, how much did your field placement contribute to your social work practice knowledge base?
  - a. not at all
  - b. a little
  - c. a moderate amount
  - d. a great deal
6. Are there any suggestions you would make to the generalist practice program?

Developed by: Emily Marie Balandra in collaboration with Dr. Shon

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